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ABSTRACT

This report provides a review of literature exploring accuracy in newspaper stories. The findings discussed do not reveal definite reasons for inaccuracy, but several possible error sources are delineated: amount of reporter involvement, type of news, psychological factors (stress, news reporters' fantasies, open/closed-mindedness, tendency to evaluate others by whether they are "like" the reporters), the editorial process, writing style, imprecision of language, and time and competitive pressures. A summary of a research study on "sibling" newspapers--competing newspapers with the same owner--is also included. (AEA)

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Literature Review

Accuracy in News Reporting A Review of the Research

By Michael Singletary

HIGHLIGHTS: A review of literature exploring accuracy in newspaper stories. Although the findings do not reveal definite reasons for inaccuracy, several possible error sources are delineated: amount of reporter involvement, type of news, psychological factors (stress, newsmen's fantasies, open-closed-mindedness, "co-orientation"), the editorial process, writing style, imprecision of language and time and competitive pressures.

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Editors always have demanded endlessly of their reporters, "Accuracy! Accuracy! Accuracy!" This question of accuracy took a quantitative turn with the pioneering study in 1936 by Charnley,[5] who was concerned with the number of errors and their nature, rather than what the errors meant to the reader.

Further studies throughout the 50s and 60s continued to pile up statistics detailing what editors already knew in outline . . . their stories were sometimes inaccurate.

Most of the studies examined two categories of errors: (1) mechanical, such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, typographical mistakes, and (2) all the rest.

This report examines some potential causes of inaccuracy, causes which run the gamut from poorly-prepared reporters and hasty coverage of breaking news, to a relatively new approach, the psychological foundations for inaccuracy.

Early Studies

In the 60s, Berry studied the accuracy of 270 local newspaper stories in three California newspapers, expanding his study to identify types of stories in which errors occurred.[3]

He separated stories into two categories: anticipated stories, such as news conferences, or interviews; and unanticipated stories, such as robberies or disasters. As expected, stories which were anticipated were more accurate, although the difference was significant only for one of the three newspapers.

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As a further refinement, Berry categorized errors as *objective* (factual or mechanical) or *subjective* (errors of meaning or interpretation). Then he related this categorization to whether the stories were anticipated or unanticipated. The notion that errors would be reduced if there were time enough to prepare holds true only for objective errors. Subjective errors actually increased when the story was anticipated.

Finally, Berry analyzed the number of errors in terms of the *source* of the story. Stories obtained as press releases were found to be the most accurate (62% had no errors). Other sources were: personal interview (55% accurate); reporters at event (45%); telephone interview (36%); police, letters, court records, magazines and other newspapers (45%). About 82 percent of stories which relied on law enforcement personnel for information had one or more errors, while only 18 percent of stories which relied on court records had one or more errors.

Lawrence and Grey took Berry's probe of the nature of newspaper inaccuracy a step further by concentrating on how "subjective" errors occur and how they might be avoided.[17] They interviewed 19 newsmakers, or sources, and 12 reporters who wrote the stories.

Analyzing their data, Lawrence and Grey said reporters and news sources agreed on two major causes of subjective error: (1) reporters' insufficient background information and (2) news desk and editing practices and policies. News sources added that reporters too often relied on sensationalism, dramatization and over-emphasis in phrasing, and relied too little on personal contact between source and reporter. Reporters, meanwhile, felt they were allowed too little time to gather and write a story, and that some reporters were either lazy or incompetent.

Although their sample was very small, Lawrence and Grey believed they had identified an important relationship: a lack of personal contact with a news source seemed to be related to the gravity of an error. Lack of contact increases the likelihood of major subjective errors occurring.

Conflicting Data

Years later, in a study by Scanlon, new data was revealed that differed from earlier studies.

Where Berry had found the personal interview produced the most accurate story, Scanlon found the personal interview to be the least accurate.[28] Attempting to resolve this contradiction, he collapsed five story sources into just two, labeling them active and passive. Passive stories were defined as situations in which the reporter was mostly functioning as an editor, writer or observer; e.g., press release or mere presence as an observer at an event. Active stories were defined as stories in which the reporter is involved in the story, such as with a telephone interview or a news conference.

In the active-passive breakdown, stories of the passive type were 71 percent accurate, where stories of the active type were 37 percent accurate. The data suggested that the "fastest route to an error is to allow a reporter to get involved—by an interview or dialogue of any sort."

Data from a recent study at Temple University supports that point; student reporter errors most often were misquotes, omissions and underemphasis, the kinds of errors an active reporter might make.[26]

Other Explanations for Error

As a further check, Scanlon studied the accuracy of stories from the sports and society departments of the Ottawa newspapers. Stories from those departments tended to be written either from press releases or from passive observation at an event. The society stories were 90 percent accurate, and the sport stories were 77 percent accurate.

This may be traceable to the fact that sports and society writing are rather specialized, and the reporters know what to expect, whereas in general news reporting, this is not the case. Straight news may also tend to be more controversial.

At some newspapers, news dealing with science, education, medicine, military writing and many other specific topics has been assigned to specialty writers. Specialty writing has its own problems; technical jargon must be reduced accurately to lay terms. But there is some evidence that Scanlon's hunch about specialty writers is correct.

Tarleton hypothesized that inaccuracy increases as reading difficulty increases.[35] To test this notion, he selected 40 stories from several newspapers and magazines. Errors appeared in only four stories. The errors involved ambiguity, misinterpretation and improper terminology. Three of the erroneous stories had a "difficult" reading-ease rating, and the fourth had a "very difficult" rating.

Recent Research: Social Issues, Reporter Predisposition, Crises

In more recent research, Ryan and Owen[27] tested eight metro newspapers' coverage of nine "social issues," including housing, racism-sexism, ecology and health. They concluded errors were more likely to occur in the reporting of social issues than in straight news reports. Only 30.6 percent of 193 social-issue stories were reported "error free." This finding was similar to reports of accuracy in science news. The

authors suggested social news was more complicated and difficult to cover than general news, and reporters who cover such issues should probably follow special academic and professional training to prepare for the task.

Starck and Soloski[32] studied the effects of reporters' attitudes in covering controversial news events. They were concerned with the extent to which the reporters' prejudice toward a topic might be reflected in their stories. They found that student reporters with stronger views on the story they covered tended to write stories which research judges felt did more than just present the facts. Conversely, reporters who were relatively neutral toward the news event wrote more objective stories.

Scanlon, in a 1978 study,[29] re-constructed six "crisis" events and compared the facts with the media reports of the events. He found that the general impression left by the media accounts was, on the whole, accurate. But he found considerable "inconsistency" in facts; 23 specific verifiable errors in the reports, none of which was attributed. He suggested media in the wake of disaster should be prepared to admit the absence of accurate information.

But, of course, not all errors are the fault of the reporter. Some are introduced by editing and rewriting. And the incident at Three Mile Island showed that many originate with the source of the news.

During Three Mile Island the Boston Herald-American ran a series of clocks, each showing a different hour, and each followed by a different "official" version of what happened. Newsweek magazine said AP had to change its Friday afternoon lead 28 times to keep pace with the changing "facts."

Editor Response to Inaccuracy

Singletary, Bax and Mead[35] asked a sample of editors how they typically responded to inaccuracies in news reporting in their papers. On average, the editors seemed to have a realistic view of the frequency and type of errors and were more concerned with so-called "subjective" than "objective" errors. Nearly 70 percent said they had never terminated the employment of a person for objective errors; only 48 percent had never fired a person for subjective errors. The editors felt they only infrequently introduced errors by their own editing practices or headline writing.

Psychological Bases of Inaccuracy: Stress

Greenberg and Tannenbaum have identified "cognitive stress" as a cause of written inaccuracy.[11] A number of other studies showed that stress-producing stimuli such as electric shock, sensory deprivation and mild threats lead to a reduction in accuracy of verbal and behavioral responses.[7,13] Of course, these stimuli would not generally be expected in a newsroom, yet the principal probably pertains: cognitive stress leads to a reduction in accuracy.

The Greenberg-Tannenbaum study involved the manipulation of cognitive stress by exposing one group of subjects to a threatening attack on a strongly held belief, while another group received a supportive rather than attacking treatment and a third group received no manipulation. Subjects were "naive" Wisconsin undergraduates. Stress was induced by having them read an "official" report attacking their Wisconsin journalism program.

The authors concluded that cognitive stress of this kind resulted in impairment of reporting. They said stress subjects generally took longer to compose and write their messages, that their messages contained more errors and were less readable.

Co-orientation is another potential source of inaccuracy.[37] The term "co-orientation" refers to the tendency to evaluate others by whether they are "like us" or "not like us." Students' identification with other students is a kind of co-orientation, as is businessmen's identification with other businessmen. People tend to agree with messages offered by persons like themselves.

Co-orientation applies to journalists, or at least to journalism students, even though they supposedly are taught to be objective in their evaluations. Zimmerman and Bauer asked journalism students and prospective teachers to prepare a talk before either of two audiences, one of which would favor, the other which would not favor the argument presented. The intent was to determine what information a person would remember from that which was presented to him.

As expected, those who read material to an audience co-oriented against the argument remembered "much less" of the material. Schramm, in his analysis of the study, said the data "raises certain questions about the objectivity of news coverage."[30]

Although the Zimmerman-Bauer study involved students, the application to the real world of journalism is not too farfetched. Pool and Shulman have reported that journalists often have an audience in mind when they write, and Zimmerman and Bauer suggest journalists might evaluate that audience as being either "for us" or "against us." Thus, the reporter might color his story, however subtly, to conform to his expectations of audience reaction. A hostile audience might induce stress which could then be countered in either of several ways: belligerence, deference or nonchalance. To some degree, the audience may affect the accuracy with which the reporter represents the original event.

Neuroses and Information Distortion

Kernan and Heiman, in an experimental study in 1972, illustrated the relationship of neuroses to information distortion.[15] They showed a group of 212 university students three television commercials and measured their recall. The students were also given a personality inventory which measured neuroticism-stability and introversion-extroversion. Results indicated neuroticism "appears to bear heavily on the inclination to distort information." Introversion, however, seemed not to matter, at least not at a significant level.

How does neurosis relate to professional journalism? Horney, a psychiatrist, has written that, "The great majority of us have to struggle with problems of competition, fears of failure, emotional isolation, distrust of others and of our own selves, to mention only a few of the problems that may be present in a neurosis." These struggles, if pronounced, could reasonably be expected to increase the likelihood of inaccuracy.

Distortion of information in the Kernan-Heiman study involved mainly overstatement and understatement. Data failed to support the contention of Wales, Rarick and Davis that errors by readers tend to be exaggerations rather than minimizations.[36] Rather, Kernan and Heiman found errors were evenly divided between overstatement and understatement.

Open and Closed-Mindedness

The relationship between authoritarianism and editorial decision-making was introduced around 1950 by Adorno, and others.[1] The notion has since been broadened and applied in countless research. Rokeach studied authoritarianism in terms of dogmatism and "the open and closed mind."[24] Mertz, Miller, and Ballance, among others related closed-mindedness to attitude change.[20] In other words, open or closed-mindedness, or dogmatism, or authoritarianism, seems to matter in both the recollection and acceptance of information. The assumption is that the reporter with a "closed mind" will produce a somewhat different story—with the risk of the difference being perceived as "error"—than the reporter with the "open mind."

Pool and Shulman studied newsmen's fantasies toward their audience as a predictor of accuracy in their news copy.[23] They identified three processes operating simultaneously and independently in the writing process:

- Good news tended to elicit images of supportive persons, and bad news tended to elicit images of critics
- Where the images elicited were congruent with the kind of news, the reporting was more accurate than where the images were not
- Good news was more accurately reported than bad.

Pool and Shulman explained that each newsman had a basic fantasy of his relationship to the world, either as a recipient of reward or as a combatant. They said the reporters' actions sought to sustain this image.

Their study began with 33 exploratory interviews with newsmen. For most of the reporters, the act of writing "seemed to provide one of two kinds of gratification," either the opportunity to bestow pleasure on readers, or the opportunity to use words as weapons against antagonists.

To test the hypothesis that newswriters would be better able to communicate stories which fit their particular strategy of self-enhancement (joy or combat), Pool and Shulman devised four stories which required rewriting. Two were "good news," and two were "bad news." Each of the 132 student subjects rewrote one of the four stories, then responded to a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked the students to list all the persons who had come to their minds while they were writing their stories. The average number of images was seven; each image was rated on a scale from "very approving" to "very critical."

The authors found that the accuracy of writing is low for both good news and bad news when the news is incongruent with the tone of the reporters' fantasies; there is a tendency for bad news to be more distorted than good news. A reporter with strong beliefs that his readers support him may have great need for support from reference persons. Reporters who perceive their readers as critical of them engage in a kind of mental debate in which they aggress and triumph against opponents; the reporting of good news may not serve the purposes of these reporters.

Greenberg has similarly reported that when a reporter's views are in conflict with the event he is to cover, the reporter's performance is affected.[10] Reporting is slower, less accurate and less readable. Gieber investigated stress between the newspaperman and his news source in the handling of controversial civil liberties news.[9] He found that reporters perceived themselves as the objects of manipulation by a news source. In defense, the reporter apparently changed his style of writing to reduce the conflict. In other words, the reporter shifted into a position of, "How can it be safely written?"

Also supportive of the Pool-Shulman experiment, Bettinghaus and Preston found that people take longer to do a task inconsistent with their ideals than one which is consistent.[4] The more closed-minded the subjects, the more likely they were to follow that pattern. The task, in this case, was the writing of "inconsistent" sentences. The difficulty of writing increased as dogmatism increased.

Selective Perception

Meyer attempted to demonstrate the importance of an individual's selective perception in news reporting.[21] He videotaped a televised appearance by former Vice President Spiro Agnew and compared one audience's response with that of a group which only saw a New York Times account of the same event. Meyer found a vast discrepancy between the attitudes of those who saw the program and those who read the newspaper account. Students who saw only the newspaper account were reinforced in their attitudes against Agnew, while students who saw the televised appearance judged Agnew a more reliable source of information, more sincere and more competent. Meyer concluded that "the New York Times reporter who wrote the account of the program was the victim of selective perception."

Also in regard to selective perception, Donohew and Palmgreen have written that an individual ordinarily is "submerged in a vast sea" of internal and external stimuli which make it impossible for the individual to attend all simultaneously.[3] They said it is both inevitable and imperative that people exercise a high degree of selectivity in receiving and processing environmental stimuli.

Others, however, have argued that "the principle of selective exposure is by no means universally accepted.[19] Segal, for one, said mass communication researchers have relied on the notion for years, "despite experimental disconfirmations."[31] He suggested there are at least five different selective processes (exposure, perception, evaluation, retention and association), and relevant variables include the individual's interest, involvement, commitment, identification and certainty.

Other Sources of Inaccuracy: Writing Style

Ross has called journalism's "inverted pyramid" news style a hazard to accuracy.[25] "It is hard to avoid distortion or exaggeration in using such a formula," he said. "Facts are commonly thrown out of context and out of proportion." He added the formula is "one of the most dangerous ever invented." The objective data on the question raised by Ross are somewhat inconclusive.

Kerrick compared the inverted pyramid with other styles affecting attitude change.[16] She cited studies by Griffin and Gieber[12] which reported that the narrative structure is easier to comprehend than the inverted pyramid and that the narrative structure has a stronger effect than the inverted pyramid.

Kerrick showed junior high and senior high students one of four stories written in the inverted pyramid form, then rewritten in narrative. Students were pre- and post-tested; results indicated there were no significant differences in the attitudinal effects of the two story forms.

Receiving the Message

Milbourn and Stone, among others, have contributed to a line of research in which recipients of communication are classified as being either source-oriented or message-oriented.[22] Reporters, of course, are communication recipients as well as communicators. Milbourn and Stone found that "expertness (sic) of source often affects message-oriented respondents more than source-oriented respondents." In other words, some people are more impressed by expertise than others, and they likely color their subsequent communications based on this impression.

Message-oriented recipients tend to be more concerned with how well the arguments in a message are substantiated. Message-oriented communication recipients would seem to make the best reporters, in terms of critically evaluating the information to which they are exposed.

Berlo argues that some of the inaccuracy inherent in communication can be attributed to people's conception that meanings are within words, rather than in the people that use them.[2] He illustrated that point by describing a scientist who talked with a news reporter, and later was irritated at the story which appeared in type. "You tell these people what they need to know and they don't print it," the scientist complained. Berlo suggested the scientist might have failed to recognize that word meanings are so imprecise as to be found within the users of the words, rather than in the words themselves.

Berry, in a study cited earlier, alluded to the possibility that headlines can contribute to perceived inaccuracy in a news story.[3] Tannenbaum earlier demonstrated that headlines can affect the story's total impression, and that the impression itself can be inaccurate despite the story's accuracy.[34]

Media Pressures

News media competition is another source of error, but there is little quantitative data with which to evaluate the extent. Clark and Blankenburg cite the wire service handling of a major Supreme Court ruling (prayer in schools) as an example of error caused by competition.[6] The authors said the AP and UPI stories were written under "fiercely competitive" time pressures and with misleading initial reports.

As Berry has pointed out, news media have a tremendous amount of information to process, and a very short time in which to do it. Reporters are forced to reduce great issues to brief stories, and to tell them in language the readers can understand. The more handling of the information, the greater the likelihood of error—although the opposite of this is no guarantee of perfect accuracy.

Each day, newspapers must compromise between timeliness and something approaching accuracy.[3] They can't wait until all the information is in, and there's no assurance even that would help. Berry suggests that this compromise is the newspapers' strength. People expect their news to be fresh, and it is the newspaperman's difficult task to make sure as best he can, that it is also accurate.

Summary

In the eyes of some, inaccuracy in news copy is "the cardinal journalistic sin." Editors probably see inaccuracy as evidence of carelessness or ignorance. But there is some question about the point at which errors begin to bother the reader. One study has found that news copy had to be "extremely deviant" before the errors made a significant difference to readers. But a number of news organizations, fearing loss of credibility with readers, have initiated actions to reduce errors. These include ombudsmen and bureaus of accuracy and fair play.

The first attempt to quantify journalist inaccuracy was made by Charnley in 1936. Numerous researchers since then have confirmed that about half of all straight news stories contain some type of error. The error rate may be better, however, when all editorial copy, including society, obituary, sports and business stories, is considered. Weekly newspapers seem to have a higher accuracy rate, possibly because of fewer deadlines or less controversial copy.

Although the results are not clear, certain patterns tend to emerge when accuracy is considered as a function of anticipated versus unanticipated news, or subjective versus objective news. One researcher showed accuracy could also be related to whether the news was "good news" or "bad news." Stories originating with press releases generally had the highest accuracy.

Lack of contact between a reporter and his source increased the likelihood of serious subjective error, according to some researchers. But others have found the best accuracy with the least reporter involvement. Reporters and sources tended to agree that too often the reporter has too little time and too little background information to do an accurate story. Reporters also felt that the editorial desks also contributed somewhat to the accuracy problem.

National surveys have revealed that most Americans have perceived a difference between an event they witnessed and the published account of the event. A number of polls have found newspapers' accuracy rated below radio, television and news magazines.

A large number of psychological phenomena are believed to contribute to accuracy. They include: authoritarianism, dogmatism, or open-closed-mindedness; neuroticism; co-orientation; source-message orientation; cognitive stress and newsmen's fantasies.

Finally, inaccuracies were also attributed to editors, sources of information, writing styles, competitive pressures, the normal imprecision of language and headlines. ■

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This is the first of a series of research summaries which will periodically appear in ANPA News Research Reports. These briefs will summarize studies appearing in research journals and other periodicals not on the regular reading list of most newspaper people. This summary was prepared by Marlene Ellin of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau.

Sibling Newspapers Rival For Attention

Competing newspapers with the same owner can offer readers as much diversity in both hard and soft news as competing newspapers with separate owners, and do not necessarily pose a threat to an open "marketplace of ideas," claim Ronald G. Hicks and James S. Featherston of Louisiana State University.

Hicks and Featherston, who conducted a study of competing morning and afternoon newspapers in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Shreveport, reported their findings in an article entitled, "Content Duplication and Contrasting Newspaper Ownership" in the Autumn 1978 issue of *Journalism Quarterly*. The New Orleans and Baton Rouge newspapers are jointly owned by newspaper groups; the Shreveport newspapers are separately owned.

The jointly owned New Orleans and Baton Rouge newspapers, Hicks and Featherston found, seemed to vary just as much from one another as did the separately owned newspapers in Shreveport. The degree of diversity between morning and afternoon newspapers in terms of hard news, feature news items and non-news items was almost equal in all three cities.

In interviews with staff members of the New Orleans and Baton Rouge newspapers, the researchers found that competition is encouraged by management. Each reporter carefully guards his own stories and takes great pride in "scooping" counterparts on the sister newspaper. In addition, the competing newspapers in both cities use markedly different typographic and design elements in a concerted effort to create their own distinctive images.

Calling for further research and a re-examination of our fears concerning news monopolies, Hicks and Featherston conclude that "whether a joint ownership wishes to offer two distinct products in the same city is a matter of ownership policy—not of ownership economic structure."